

DRAFT  
1/27/69  
DE:sw

For, to human ears, "error" -- an unfavorable divergence from planned or expected results -- spells "failure" somewhere in the system. And typically, the suspicion of failure, and ultimately the responsibility, falls not just on one element but to some degree on a whole hierarchy of individuals responsible for operations in the given sphere, and/or those responsible for planning or goal-setting or for predicting environment and performance. And "failure," once observed and reported, is bad news for all those who might be suspected or held responsible for it (and good news for their rivals). Each of them--if he wants to keep his job, or his freedom of action on the job, or various kinds of "credit" to assure enough resources to do the job -- has reason to wish that report withheld, or postponed, or apart by accompanying information, or softened, "fuzzed-up," made more ambiguous, uncertain, less attention-drawing. In other words, where a ~~metaph~~ thermostat does not act as if it cared whether it kept its "job" or was replaced, a human does tend to care, and to realize that reporting affects his chances. And being, unlike a thermostat, a highly-flexible, intelligent, goal-seeking mechanism himself, with self- and job-preservation among his goals, the human often has a good many ways to counter threats to his position.

Where information flows upward strictly along a chain of command, this means reporting by men who are held responsible for the state of affairs on which they are reporting, to men who are likewise responsible

for this state of affairs, who have their own personal interests to protect, and who have control over the advancement, delegated authority and resources, are the firing of the men doing the reporting. A report of "error" thus passes through a whole sequence of men, any one of whom may interpret it as a sign of "failure," or fear that it will be so interpreted by others: hence, each of whom has incentives to suppress it or modify it. It takes only one, somewhere along the line, to yield to that impulse, to deprive higher levels of the undiluted context of that warning.

Unless there are strong disincentives to such distortion (e.g., checks on the accuracy of reporting, and punishment of those found clearly guilty of distortion), an organization may have strong tendencies (not found in a system of non-human elements) to become "autistic," in the fashion of some disturbed children or psychotics: i.e., to respond not to realistic perceptions of reality but to fantasies, "daydreams" and hallucinations, to perceptions and reasonings strongly biased by needs, wishes, fears. In narrower terms (which do not comprehend the range of effects), whole/ the organization becomes prone to "wishful thinking." In extreme cases, it could act "psychotically," on a basis of perceptions and coherent but reporting that gave a/wildly misleading conception of the real world.

*Davies*  
WRONG BELIEFS (of Davies)

1. Viet Cong needs majority support.
  2. Viet Cong has majority support.
  3. No strong anti-Communist sentiment exists (except landlords).
  4. Country has been physically destroyed.
  5. NLF is not controlled by Hanoi. (totally?)  
(or: Hanoi controls all PAVN-SV)
  6. Revolt started spontaneously in South Vietnam. (?)
  7. US runs Government in detail.
  8. Corruption (pre-1965?) is greater than Asian average.
  9. Much less competence in GVN than Asian average.
  10. NLF is not interested in unifying Vietnam.
  11. Viet Cong owned countryside (pre-Tet). now
  12. Land reform is key Viet Cong issue.
  13. US government is trying to overthrow.
  14. Decentralization - due to lack of planning
- ~~Doubtful:~~  
14. US seems to want a decentralized administration of country

DOVE ILLUSIONS

US presence is doomed, inevitably and fatally self-defeating;

Most Viet Cong are pre-Communist;

Most peasants are pro-Viet Cong (not merely anti-GVN);

the NLF is not controlled by the DRV;

Viet Cong success proves mass popular sympathy for Viet Cong

[rather: it proves latter not necessary]

Outside support is not only small (true) but not important, critical

[not true: with US there, anyway].

Vietnam is "ungovernable."

Hanoi did not approve or support NLF revolt until 1960-61

[actually, this may be true before 1959, but not after).

[and see Kahn list of above premises]

Hawk illusions (Mysteries of Vietnam)

1. Communists are increasingly "off balance."

They have "lost the initiative?"

2. "The night no longer belongs to Charlie."

Viet Cong problems: security; morale; sleep....

"No longer a Viet Cong conviction of victory..."

"They have promised victory this year; if denied...."

"Viet Cong now know they cannot win military victory."

("so they will fade away...")

3. Walt (Westmoreland): "If newspapers would cooperate, convince Hanoi we aren't about to quit, they will stop being willing to take enormous losses..."

[And? We can't impose losses on them if they stop attacking.]

[Is news of US losses to be suppressed? How is US public to be made to accept these? Or costs?] .

4. Rusk: If DRV would leave "neighbors" alone, problem would be easy..."

5. "War is in the countryside..."

"All peasants want is security; and to be let alone..."

(Viet Cong? Catholics, Hoa Hao?) "Give him security, and he will..."

"People are starting to give us information...."

says the bull,  
of the matador

NOTE 1 of Lessons From Failure In Vietnam

THE PROCESS OF NOT-LEARNING

As one examines our involvement in Vietnam since the Viet Cong resurgence about a decade ago, what seems most dismaying is not that early policies were often mistaken, but that early mistakes lasted so long or were so often repeated.

It is scarcely possible to point to a "mistake" of recent months or years that has not a direct precedent in operations against the insurgents five to ten years ago. (Or even twenty years ago: when a different Western power, in company with Vietnamese elements of the same character as the present GVN, was confronting essentially the same organizational opponent we face today in Vietnam.) And even then, many of these practices were sometimes, even frequently, identified as failings, and recommendations for improvement -- much the same as current ones -- were made and even "accepted." Yet there is hardly a single policy seen as "mistaken" five or ten (or twenty) years ago that one does not find repeated again and again and again. Most have a counterpart existing today. The disaster we have built in Vietnam is founded, no doubt, in part on initial ignorance and error, but it reflects no less significantly the distinct phenomenon of the persistence of ignorance and recurrence of error.

Newcomers to Vietnam are likely to draw false hope from the very "obviousness" of the "errors" they have observed in our policies and their implementation; "room for improvement" -- as Herman Kahn puts it in his recent book on Vietnam -- leaps to their eyes. But their estimates of the ease and likelihood of achieving actual improvement in these areas would probably be sharply tempered -- would become, in fact, closer to the cynical expectations of embittered "old Vietnam hands" -- if they were aware just how long or how often these obvious mistakes had been in evidence, and had been so recognized. Innocence of this seems, in particular, the basis for the optimism -- limited as it is -- that pervades the Kahn book, "Can We Win In Vietnam?", as I have noted in a recent

review, (see p-

Our failure to learn from our experience in Vietnam is itself one of the most significant lessons to be drawn. One conclusion from this long experience is that both current "errors" and the general tendency for errors to persist or be repeated are likely to continue to obtain in at least the near future. And this pessimistic conclusion can have important implications for short-run policies. But if it is realistic to take this phenomenon as given and to adapt policy to it in the short-run, for our longer-run purposes we cannot be content with this; it is crucial to try to understand this experience and if possible, to modify the processes that have led to it. Why did we not learn more often, more rapidly, more reliably, more wisely from our experience in Vietnam? What must change if we are to do better, in Vietnam and elsewhere in the future?

If one starts from notions of the processes and mechanisms that in general underlie learning in individuals and in organizations, and then examines some of our institutional arrangements in Vietnam -- e.g., for observing and reporting, for analyzing, for remembering -- one quickly sees weaknesses and lacks that can explain a good part of our failure to learn. (Just why these short-comings have persisted is another question that requires examination.) In many cases, these weaknesses are not peculiar to our operations in Vietnam; they suggest likely limitations on our ability to learn in many other areas and in quite different sorts of situations. Limitations on our ability to learn could affect, for example, our ability to exploit unexpected successes. But a close examination of our performance in Vietnam suggests, in particular, some specific disabilities when it comes to learning from major failures. And if, as seems likely, we have shown a peculiar inability to learn in Vietnam compared to our learning performance elsewhere, a large part of the explanation may lie here. For our experience in Vietnam, of course, has very largely been experience of failure; and so far as our ability to learn from failure is limited, we have been hampered in learning there at all.

### The Feedback of "Error" Signals

Let us focus on the particular problem of the inadequate feedback to commanders and political authorities of unbiased information on U.S. and GVN performance. This is by no means the only problem that underlies inadequate learning in Vietnam, but is one of the most critical and least recognized. Many other problems also contribute to the persistence of failure in our efforts there, but this particular problem happens to derive in large part from the pervasive phenomenon of failure itself. I shall consider first the significance of such a problem in abstract terms; then, its actual incidence and impact in Vietnam; and finally some ways in which it might be surmounted.

In the last two decades, the disciplines of "cybernetics" and "artificial intelligence" have evolved around the problems of designing electronic systems capable of exhibiting "intelligent", adaptive, goal-pursuing or purposive, problem-solving behavior: i.e., behavior that brings about a dynamic approach to a goal or "solution" in the face of fluctuations in environmental conditions and component performance (and perhaps, shifts in goal criteria as well). Analyses of these design problems have led to a number of concepts related to problems of control, adaptiveness and learning that are applicable not only to inorganic systems but to individuals and organizations. Perhaps the central concept is that of "feedback," i.e., the flow back to a control component of information concerning: (a) the difference between actual component performance and commanded or desired performance; and more especially (b) the difference, or "error" between the actual states and relationship of system and environment to the desired, "goal" states and relationships. These "error signals" cause the control component to modify its control signals or to change the internal structure and functioning of the system, or to seek new information, or to modify the goals sought.

In contrast to this, it is possible to exercise control, or to move the system toward a goal state, without such a capability for feedback (this is known technically as "straight line control," lacking a "feedback loop"). On the basis of a guess or an estimate, or a one-time

initial observation of the relation of the system to the goal-state, a command or even a sequence of commands can be given to components, based on their known properties and calculations of system performance, so as to approach the goal. But successful control in this fashion -- which could, if adequate, be simpler and cheaper than feedback control -- requires either that the component and system performance and the relevant environmental conditions and the goal-state itself be fixed and known precisely, or else that all of these be highly predictable. For such a system will not show a dynamic tendency to "seek" an unpredictably shifting goal-state, or to adapt to unforeseen fluctuations or improving knowledge of environmental pressures and component behavior. In other words, imperfect initial knowledge or understanding of the components and the system itself, or the impact of the environment, or shifts in any of these factors (and such phenomena are almost universal) will mean that initial commands may be inappropriate and are likely to become increasingly so over time, so that the goal eludes the system.

"Feedback control," designed to permit flexible, adaptive behavior, depends upon system components sensing, recognizing, and reporting back to a control element the existence and nature of "error"; a divergence between objectives or plans or commands and actual performance or situations. But a system using human components may be specifically biased against either the sensing or the reporting back of such "error," in particular because it may be against the personal interests of humans at various levels in the system to do so.

This is not, of course, to suggest that having humans doing the observing and reporting is in every way disadvantageous to the purposes of the system. While in some functions it may well be that a human is less reliable, less precise, or less fast than an available or conceivable non-human component, a human component is likely to be far more flexible and adaptive, and thus to serve the ability of the overall system to show these qualities, enabling it better to survive and learn in a changing environment. To the extent that the human individual acts in accordance with the "system aims," he can in the pursuit of these aims interpret guidelines and rules of thumb flexibly, shift his focus of attention to accommodate unforeseen shifts in environmental conditions, recognize the possible relevance of new types of data or new patterns on which to report, communicate his inferences and modify his own behavior in the light of his accumulated experience. In short, the human, being himself a complex, adaptive organism, can contribute greatly to the "intelligent" behavior of the system as a whole in pursuit of the system objectives. (These are among the sorts of considerations that come into play when there is a real choice between having a function performed by a human or non-human component: as in space exploration.)

*This feedback element measures the sum of action being followed, and the component, with plan to achieve the goal of maximizing the system.*

But along with this there is a price. No human being uses his capability for intelligence and flexibility solely in/pursuit of specified "system goals." Always he has personal goals for his own survival and advancement, for the welfare of family, friends, and other groups whose interests concern him, even for the behavior he would like to see the overall system exhibit, which may differ significantly from the current desires of leadership or control elements. Systems with human components, e.g., bureaucracies, try to build in more or less strong incentives for the individuals to pursue only organizational goals, as defined by the leadership, at least within limits and "during working hours" but such constraint cannot be and virtually never is absolute. Possible divergence in the mind and heart of a human system element, can affect every sort of action or choice that individual may be called on to make; and this applies as well to his actions of reporting information.<sup>P</sup> If certain kinds of messages are more likely than others to endanger the individual's personal safety, or his job security, to worsen his relationships with other individuals in or out of the organization, reduce his chances of advancement, lessen the comfort, convenience, interest, influence or other condition of his job, or disadvantage the interests of a bureau, agency, sub-group or outside organization/to which he belongs, or preclude-the- lead to organizational actions of which he strongly disapproves, such messages are less likely than others to be sent accurately, promptly, or at all.

This can lead to the distortion or suppression of many kinds of signals, including the "straight-line, feed-forward," delivery of commands from higher control. But it so happens that this divergence of interests is especially likely to arise in the case of the feed-back of messages explicitly shaped as "error signals," or perceived by the sender as likely to

be interpreted as such. Or in many cases the <sup>human</sup> recipient of a report of "error" is particularly likely to act in ways that are ultimately against the personal interests of the sender of such a message. At the very least, report of error -- if it is outside a familiar range, or of an unexpected sort -- is likely to be disappointing, frustrating, unwelcome: the human reaction to such news is anger, all too likely to spill over upon the one who brings it. The fate of the bearer of bad tidings is familiar in history and theatre, and an angry, punishing response is not limited to oriental despots. However, such a report of "error" -- of divergence from plan or expectation, of at least partial, temporary failure -- can be more than disappointing to a "commander" whose influence, and especially, whose <sup>actual</sup> tenure <sup>in some</sup> depends ultimately upon his effectiveness in leading the system towards a goal. Such a report may <sup>dangerously</sup> endanger his continued command. This is particularly true of a democratic leader, whose continuance in office is at least periodically reviewed by an electorate, <sup>informed</sup> But ultimately, such a check applies even to a reign of a despot or a dynasty. Of course, in the long run it is the condition of failure, rather than news of it from a particular source, that is threatening to such a commander. But the flow of information for operational purposes is likely to produce precise reports of current failure, or warnings of it, much earlier than is available to the electorate or body with ultimate governing power (e.g., in a corporation, the board of directors, or beyond them, the stockholders). Thus, in the first instance, it is the very existence of the internal report, with its potential for leaking to the <sup>or monitoring</sup> a governing/body, that is threatening. The commander receiving such a report faces a dilemma. If he is best to act to reduce the error, moving toward the system goal, he needs a continuing flow of information on the divergence between apparent situation and the

goal-state. Yet each one of those reports, if it is permitted to originate and to move upwards through the system, carries the risk of endangering the commander's continuance in office.<sup>D</sup> One response may be to narrow the set of monitoring sources, and institute special "security" procedures affecting the channels of information so as to reduce the likelihood of leaks. This is a compromise; for increased security is likely to be purchased at the price of reduced precision and timeliness in the warning signals, or the timeliness and effectiveness of system actions responding to them. ( Thus, one common way of increasing security is to ~~reduce~~- shorten vertically a number of layers of command in transmitting especially "horizontal" sensitive "error" information and also to cut out/distribution of such signals to a staff elements; but this deprives the commander of staff analysis that might be highly valuable to an appropriate decision, and prevents control actions being taken on such information on lower levels of command, which might have achieved more timely and more effective action. Moreover, this procedure can mean an overload of information and decision-making upon the highest level of command, with error signals for various crises all competing for the <sup>commander's</sup> attention.) (But this solution at least preserves in some form the flow of error information. Yet another common response to this common dilemma is, more simply, to shut off the potentially embarrassing information altogether, if continuing or avoiding certain kinds of observations and analyses, or reports, or strongly deterring, by various informal sanctions, reports of an unwelcome content. In effect, the system reverts to a straight-line control, or "dead reckoning," in hopes that the situation can be corrected, or by luck will right itself, before a governing body is alerted to an error that it might find

comparable or discreditable, or at least that the latter discovery will be postponed until the commander ~~has-a-x~~ can take steps to hedge his fortunes against it, perhaps by shifting smoothly to another position. (Even within bureaucracies, there are examples <sup>both</sup> of consultants and commanders who have, by a great timing, managed to "move from failure to failure with ever mounting success." )

Thus, the response of high levels of command to reports of "error" may be to remove the source of the reports ~~or not to~~, distort the content of such messages, rather than, or in addition to, taking action to change the situation reported on. This phenomenon can affect any sort of information system. But there is another, more pervasive sort of distortion that occurs in the special, ~~action-in-the-particular~~, highly typical case in which the feedback of information follows the chain of the "chain of command." In this case, each level of authority shares responsibility not only in this case, the reporting of information of current information on operations and environment, and at least implicitly upon the ~~success-~~ current degree of success of operations, falls upon those same subordinate elements of command who are responsible for carrying out the commands of higher levels and for controlling operations within a given sphere. In other words, subordinate commanders are relied upon to report on ~~phenomena~~ phenomena, which they know will be taken into account in judging their own success and effectiveness as commanders. Properly interpreted, in the light of all background information, an experienced analyst of ~~a~~ report of "error" might in a particular case conclude that it in no way reflected upon the performance of the subordinate commander, reflecting instead ~~the~~ the ~~discrepancy~~ stemming from

"circumstances beyond his control". But the lower commander can hardly rely upon such a sympathetic- sophisticated or sympathetic reading. Higher levels of command are all too likely, overburdened with such reports, to act upon them in stereotyped ways, and one of the most convenient "solutions" to the error problem presented by the lower commander, at least as an experiment, will often seem to be to replace that lower commander. For less drastically, but sometimes hardly less burdensome, the higher command may sharply curtail the authority or freedom of action of the lower element, saddling him with unwanted constraints and guidance.

The lower commander thus has a strong personal incentive to suppress or at least postpone or "soften", the sending upwards of reports that will call the attention of higher command to the existence of a persistent or unforeseen divergence from the desired, planned, expected or commanded performance. ~~He may take to gain time & of freedom of action to solve the problem at the lower level without help from higher command, and with less risk, at least in the short run, to his own personal prospects.~~ This is not at all to say that the lower commanders are motivated solely or even predominantly by ~~per~~ calculations of their own personal interests. <sup>(front A)</sup> But it is true merely to say that in nearly every case the latter considerations operate in addition to considerations of personal interest of system goals or the interests of higher commands. The relative weight of these two kinds of considerations will vary from person to person and case to case; but the direction of effect, however large or small it may be, of the personal incentives is typically to reduce the timeliness or clarity of warning signals of system error to higher control elements.

(There are exceptions to this, which deserves <sup>special</sup> attention: cases in which personal incentives work to magnify the perception of system failure or to generate false alarms.) *Front B*

*and knowingly departs from the notion of alerting or warning  
his superior of possible failure to meet*

It is not only evidence of "error" in his own particular sphere of responsibility that a commander has personal incentives to suppress; information that could jeopardize the personal interests (i.e., the evaluation of performance, and hence <sup>the</sup> power or office) of higher-level commanders to whom he is responsible can become equally dangerous to report. (Of course, if the lower commander covets the job of his superior, or has other reasons to want to discredit him, personal incentives can work in the opposite direction; but this is a special game with special risks.) That information follows the chain of command, <sup>where</sup> ~~strictly~~, <sup>actually</sup> command authority over operations extends also to authority over the reporting of subordinate commanders, and a higher commander can not only suppress specific reports but, more generally, can <sup>create</sup> strong professional disincentives for subordinates to attempt to send upwards information or analyses which, they could foresee, would be disadvantageous to their superiors. In short, if one way to lose a job is to fail, another is ~~to rep~~ may be to report upwards information bearing upon a superior's failure.

The above phenomenon depends upon an individual at a particular level in the command ~~syste-~~ hierarchy to be able to control the backflow of information to higher levels. This is especially the case when a strict chain of command exists and ~~higher~~ the highest command depends entirely upon reporting upwards through that chain. There are a number of ways of circumventing this type of distortion, which will be discussed later; and each of them has certain costs, from <sup>the</sup> point of view of higher command, and they are not likely to be used unless higher command is aware that a very <sup>significant</sup> ~~considerable~~ problem exists. This has not been the case, <sup>at the highest levels of</sup> ~~the operations~~ <sup>dealing with</sup> of the U.S. Government in Vietnam, although the problem did indeed exist,

Underlying this practice is the possibility that a report intended for one level of high authority may proceed (either by beat, or by higher directive) to still higher levels to circulate in that manner.

in fact, to a fatal degree.

To move now to this specific case of Vietnam, I would assert that each one of these causes of subversion -- <sup>*the distortion*</sup> the information of feed-back flow affected U. S. policy-making on Vietnam to a marked degree. From the time ~~of~~ <sup>that</sup> direct U. S./involvement became considerable (i.e., in about 1961, much more than in earlier years), and to the degree thereafter that involvement increased, the U. S. civil and military bureaucracies discouraged the generation of accurate but "unfavorable" <sup>reporting</sup> or "pessimistic" analyses; and even more significantly and pervasively, elements at every level of command "spontaneously" distorted, suppressed or postponed "error" information that, it was suspected, might reflect unfavorably upon themselves or their superiors. The effect of both of these influences was ultimately to deceive higher levels of command <sup>*about*</sup> and the realities in which they were called upon to operate. A system so lacking in accurate or timely feedback information could not exhibit learning; ~~xxxxx~~ the gradual adaptation <sup>*room must available to*</sup> to its own weaknesses and characteristics to the conditions set by the environment, in order to approach its goal. Nor did the U. S. Government do so.

I do not mean at all to suggest that the phenomenon described here was the exclusive or even critical cause of the slowness and unreliability of our learning process in Vietnam. Each of a number of other factors was ~~each~~ close to sufficient as an obstacle to adequate learning, <sup>*despite*</sup> and our high involvement in Vietnam. These will be discussed in more detail later, with concrete examples, but <sup>*some of them*</sup> they may be listed here:

1. Very low initial understanding, <sup>*at all levels,*</sup> ~~initial~~ and back-ground information concerning the relevant history, culture,

politics and organization of the area in which we were operating, this applying both to our allies, our opponents, and the uncommitted population; ~~and very little available background material on these matters.~~

2. Very low initial understanding by any U. S. agency of the nature of the revolutionary/~~slant~~ counterinsurgency process

~~in which we were engaged, one effect of this ignorance being~~  
~~inappropriate lack of~~  
~~whereas there are~~ appropriate indicators or measurements of progress and success  
~~(such as "body count," "kill ratio," or input measure-~~  
~~ment in the effort, tending instead to rely upon input data that~~  
~~lack validity, for example, in aircraft, and aircraft number of RVNAF operations),~~  
~~happen to be available;~~

3. Very high turnover in U.S. personnel (as in GVN personnel) at all levels,